

Don't be fooled: McConnell's victory in Kentucky is also a Tea Party win

The top Senate Republican beat his conservative primary opponent, but it came at a price for the GOP

By Ana Marie Cox

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Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell's [primary victory](#) on Tuesday night in Kentucky will undoubtedly tempt many a pundit to write the Tea Party's eulogy. But the Tea Party will achieve in electoral death what it could never achieve in life: lasting control of the GOP agenda.

McConnell won because he's got a familiar name, a lot of money and the kind of political clout that makes up for occasional lapses from orthodoxy. That might not be enough next time – as a local Kentucky Republican leader [told](#) the National Journal last week, the state party is "still McConnell's Republican Party, but it's edging toward being Rand [Paul]'s Republican Party". But, it was enough to keep it from being challenger Matt Bevin's Republican party – especially after his [unforced errors](#) and willingness to prize ideological purity over more pragmatic concerns (like the \$2bn in pork McConnell brought home for agreeing to end the government shutdown).

McConnell didn't win because he became a Tea Party member – he's so conservative, he didn't have to. (A vote [analysis](#) casts him as one of the top 25 conservative members of the Senate, and Tea Party darling and intrastate rival Paul is at number 19.) Instead, McConnell's win just shows how easily the GOP [grows over its fringes](#).

What's happening in the Republican party is the worst of both the Tea Party and more traditional "free-market" (but never really as free as advertised) economics: an aggressive "pro-business" agenda combined with radically retrogressive social policies.

You could even say at this point that the GOP isn't a big tent or even a coalition – it's a torus, an ever-expanding donut-shaped object that's empty in the middle.

The hole is where principles used to be, because flexibility comes at the price of purity. McConnell successfully neutralized challenger Bevin by being unafraid to grovel: he not only took junior Senator Rand Paul's endorsement and staff, for example, but he also put up with their [eye-rolling \(and nose-holding\)](#) in exchange for that support.

There's a history to the GOP establishment simply absorbing insurgent movements and moving right. The GOP has co-opted individual leaders (like Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater) and

even entire voting blocs (fundamentalist Christians). Each of those assimilations marched the party rightward to the point that, according to political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, the party today is the most conservative it's been in [one hundred years](#).

When the Tea Party complains that the Republican party has become too moderate, it can't be measuring against the party of the last century, much less the last administration. Yet the anti-establishment drumbeat that has echoed through the culture has created a situation in which a majority of GOP voters – 54% – think the party should [move even further to the right](#).

Yale political scientist Jacob Hacker put this in more quantitative terms: since 1975, Senate Republicans have moved twice as far to the right as Democrats have to the left – and McConnell has been a part of the leading edge. A statistical analysis of his votes since he came to the senate in 1984 shows that he's [voted more conservatively every year since](#).

At each level of governance below the Senate, the conservative undertow grows stronger. The House Republican caucus has shifted to the right six times further than the Democrats have left. And when you get closer to home – state-level offices and local races – you can see policies rolling backwards years of progress, most notably in [reproductive health](#), [gay rights](#) and, most alarmingly, [voting rights](#).

The media has meanwhile abetted this fiction of Tea Party radicalism versus establishment centrism. It takes precious little for be labelled a "moderate conservative" these days (and to reap the benefits of having even one area of ideological overlap with the great majority of political reporters who map moderate in their own views). Therefore we get a "[moderate Pete King](#)" (despite his [history](#) of anti-Muslim speech and advocacy of a greater surveillance state) and the "moderate" Jeb Bush lauded as a pragmatic voice of reason in the GOP. (People seem to have forgotten the radicalism of Bush's governorship, from his direct [intervention](#) on the Terri Schaivo case to a fiscal record with the [Cato Institute seal of approval](#).)

This all may have happened with or without the Tea Party – it's just as attributable to the disintegration of campaign finance laws as it is to a grassroots movement. But the Tea Party gave the GOP the illusion of resurgence that's turned out to be something more like a sugar high.

This rightward drift of the movement would probably be more alarming to liberals if it wasn't so objectively risky for GOP. Though a combination of socially libertarian policies and moderately conservative financial ones has the potential to attract young voters (and women and minorities), that's not what's apparently on the agenda.

Rand Paul, who is both beloved by the Tea Party and a magnet for libertarian youth, nonetheless still echoes the worst of the GOP's talking points on race and gender. Polling after the 2012 elections showed that the GOP had failed to significantly improve its appeal to [any](#) demographic outside already partisan voters. And, as other polling – including internal Republican analysis – has shown, without demographic expansion, the GOP is [doomed](#) anyway.

McConnell's win fits nicely into a narrative of declining Tea Party influence. Yet the reality is that the Tea Party has won, even if their candidate didn't. And, in more ways than one, both the GOP and "the establishment" are losing more every time.